


# How IECs Fit

---



A high-angle photograph of three business professionals—two women and one man—collaborating at a long wooden table. They are all wearing white shirts and are focused on assembling a large puzzle made of white interlocking pieces. The woman on the left is leaning over the table, the man in the center is looking down at the puzzle, and the woman on the right is also leaning in. The background is a bright, minimalist white space.

By Andy Brown

# into the Counseling Puzzle

There is undeniable tension woven throughout the college search and admission process. Students, families, and counselors—school and independent—have expectations of the process and of each other. When those expectations aren't fully met, the strain amplifies.

As professionals, and particularly as NACAC members, it's your job to support and even lead students through the process while maintaining not just high ethical standards, but the collegial spirit that allows you to put students first as they search for the right fit.

Sometimes this spirit barely gets you through the day. The pressures faced by the profession—from budget cuts, to staffing concerns, to over-demanding families or bosses—can drain your empathy for each other's daily work to dangerously low levels. When this happens, professionals can start to be critical of each other and each other's intentions. Compound that with one or two bad interpersonal experiences, and resentment can set in.

To work better together, professionals need to reset by taking the wide view of the college admission counseling puzzle... especially when sitting on the same side of the desk.

How many counselors one student needs can be a touchy subject. After all, no school counselor wants to feel their job has been outsourced. And 20 years ago, independent educational consultants (IECs) worked largely for affluent clientele and were more likely to focus on boarding schools than colleges.

### CURRENT COUNSELING CLIMATE

Things have changed—and there are two big reasons the need for, and therefore the number of, IECs is growing. The Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) estimates that five years ago there were fewer than 2,500 full-time IECs nationwide. Today they estimate there are 7,500–8,000.

"The average student hiring a consultant today is from a middle-class family," said Mark Sklarow, CEO of IECA. The demands on school counselors are increasing at a drastic rate, particularly in the public sector where budget cuts have reduced the size of counseling staff. "As the number of (school) counselors decreases and the expectations put on them increases, IECs fill an area that needs support."

American School Counselor Association member and member of the IECA Board of Directors member Belinda Wilkerson, a retired school counselor who founded the independent consultancy Steps to the Future, knows firsthand the limitations faced by public schools. "It's not about bashing your school counselor. We know what they go through. I had 355 kids on my caseload," she said. "With school budgets being cut right and left, they don't have time."

Additionally, although the cost of going to college has risen sharply in recent years, the cost of hiring a consultant hasn't gone up nearly so quickly. "Families began to see consulting as something affordable, as a small piece of the total cost of college," said Sklarow.

### WORKING TOGETHER: IEC PERSPECTIVE

IECs are fast becoming a regular part of the process, not only as paid consultants but through pro bono work with community-based organizations that focus on underprivileged and underrepresented communities. So how do school and independent counselors know who does what? And who *can* do what?

NACAC member Jeff Pilchick of The Comprehensive College Check is a retired school counselor turned independent who makes clear to his clients that

---

### PROVIDING AN EXTRA PERSPECTIVE

Students sometimes need an extra push in the right direction... and so do their parents, especially if the family is unfamiliar with the process.

"Independents can take what the high school has presented and ask, where can I expand your understanding of this? What is the question you didn't get to ask because you weren't thinking of it at the time," said NACAC and HECA member Maureen Casey of Casey Educational Consulting (and retired director of counseling at Bellarmine College Prep in San Jose, California). "High schools do a good job of creating resources for families, but parents may learn a different way or just need to come back to it, especially if they haven't been through the process before."

IECs can also ease tensions between parents and students. Casey recalls working with one student who had a track record of procrastinating. His parents, constantly checking in and asking questions, unwittingly became antagonists.

The school counselor referred them to Casey. "Sometimes just in terms of nudging students or asking them what a parent would ask, you get a different reaction. I'm a surrogate for that," she said.

Casey helped the student organize his process and compile a list of to-do items. She also held him accountable if he started to slide. "He just had a hard time keeping his appointments with the counselor and getting things done," said Casey.

If the student procrastinated, Casey would call him on it. "This way, the conversations with his parents could focus on what he talked about with me instead of arguing about the process," she said. "It lets them also become a consultant, a trusted person, while letting someone else keep the structure and timeline together."

---

both sides have to work together. "There's a misconception that we can do it all. We can't," said Pilchick, who is also a member of The Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA). "We can't write recommendation letters. We can't send transcripts. And it's not a competition. It's about the student and giving them the best preparation through the process."

Generally, parents guide how much they want their hired consultant to share with the school counselor, but students are better off when information is allowed to flow freely.

Jane Kolber, NACAC and IECA member, and long-time IEC, said that while client confidentiality is important, families need to realize school counselors are an integral part of the process. It takes both perspectives to find the right fit. "We overlap, but we really have differing knowledge," said Kolber. "I may think a student is a great match for a private school, but the school counselor knows this student is in the top 20 at his high school. As good as the student looks to me on paper, I don't know that there are 15 students above her in the class applying to those schools. A private school won't take everybody from a school that applies, even if they're all qualified. Once I know this, I know we need to add a few more schools to the student's list."

Kolber always makes it clear to families that school counselors are essential. "What I have said to families from the beginning is we need to have your school counselor be a part of the process. IECs shouldn't be hidden away. Families should use all resources and not get nervous about it."



Francine Block, proprietor of American College Admissions Consultants, NACAC member, and member of HECA's National Board (one of their goals is professionalism and working with counselors appropriately), said, "It's always the parents' discretion about whether a counselor knows or not." But client confidentiality doesn't trump her professional relationships. "The exception is if the counselor is a friend of mine. Then, unless you're willing to let me share information, I won't work with you as a family. My relationships and friendships are more important than having another family as a client."

There are many reasons a family may hire an IEC. Some have a specialization and can help student with disabilities, athletics, or extra attention over weekends and the summer. "I can do things differently as an independent, because I'm not on bus duty or lunch duty anymore," said Wilkerson. That includes being available to students and parents on evenings and weekends. On any given Saturday, Wilkerson might have students practicing standardized tests in her home office.

When IECA and NACAC member Kristina Dooley founded Estrela Consulting, she didn't know that some school counselors regarded IECs negatively. "I was actually pretty unaware that there was an implied 'divide' between IECs and school-based counselors," she said. She began working with a local counselor whose caseload was particularly high. "I would work on the list development after meeting with the student and administering a personality/interest inventory, happily adding any schools the school counselor suggested based on her longer-term experience with the students,"

---

There are many reasons a family may hire an IEC. Some have a specialization and can help student with disabilities, athletics, or extra attention over weekends and the summer.

---

said Dooley. "She handled the recommendations and transcripts while I worked with the student on their testing timeline and strategy and essay development."

When families had questions or needed help, they knew that either the school counselor or Dooley were available. "The main difference was that the students and parents had my cell phone number and knew they could reach me after school hours and on the weekends."



### WORKING TOGETHER: SCHOOL COUNSELOR PERSPECTIVE

The quality of communication between school and paid counselors determines whether they'll work together productively. "The most common problem when a student is working with both an IEC and a school counselor is that there is an additional person in the communications loop," said Ed Graf, director of college counseling at Isidore Newman School in Louisiana. "The student has to communicate with parents as well, so the additional person in the loop makes it important that the IEC and the school counselor communicate regularly."

By keeping in touch and talking directly to each other instead of through parents or the student, IECs and school counselors can prevent a duplication of efforts and, more importantly, ensure that nothing falls through the cracks.

Graf identifies four areas where IECs and school counselors can mutually agree to divide responsibility:

- Developing the college list
- Creating a testing schedule
- Helping with essays
- Reviewing the application before submission

"It makes it confusing and more difficult for the student if he or she has to work with both the IEC and the school counselor on these items," said Graf.

That's not to say that stark lines exist when it comes to who does what. What matters is that one person is designated the primary support for the student. "I like to work together as opposed to 'delineate responsibilities,'" said Paula McKinnon, a school counselor at Brooklyn Technical High School.

---

By keeping in touch and talking directly to each other instead of through parents or the student, IECs and school counselors can prevent a duplication of efforts...

---

"I think that if you know and trust the IEC, this happens organically and it is a joint effort as opposed to 'you do this, I do that.'"

Because McKinnon works in a large, public high school with graduating classes of more than 1,300 students, she and the other counselors can only give so much of their time to each student. "Sometimes, a student using an IEC will not even share their essay with me, and since I tend to work with IECs who I personally know, I trust the IEC in regards to the essay," she said. "I usually work on the original list with the student and the IEC gives his/her

opinion as to additions and deletions. A discussion usually occurs on my end and I offer my thoughts on the revised list.”

When IECs and school counselors collaborate, students get the best of both worlds. When they don’t, a student can wind up at a school that’s the wrong fit. “I once had a family work with an IEC who didn’t communicate with me at all. She suggested a university for my student, which I couldn’t understand at all in terms of fit. The student went there. She hated it,” said McKinnon. “I think by working together and getting two different lenses, we can see what we see in common about the student and then also see the student from another viewpoint, which then can expand the possibilities for the student in terms of selection.”

### RECOMMENDING AN ETHICAL IEC

IECs still encounter misperceptions about what they do, including the idea that they can get a student into any school. This isn’t possible and no ethical IEC would do it. They do their best to dispel this myth. “Consultants have to earn their reputation and authority on a daily basis,” said Sklarow.

Members of NACAC and other organizations representing IECs, such as IECA or HECA, must also follow ethical guidelines.

If helping a student select an IEC, tell families to look for someone who belongs to at least one of these organizations, and someone who has lots of experience, including having been a school counselor.

Additionally, IECs can be certified by the American Institute of Certified Educational Planners. It awards the CEP credential to professionals, working independently or in schools, who have achieved the highest level of competence in educational planning—including holding a master’s degree in education, a written assessment, and professional references. And you have to be re-certified every five years. Said Block: “This is not just something you sign up for.”

IECs build relationships with college admission officers, just as school counselors do. The addition of the IEC’s knowledge to the foundation of the school counselor’s knowledge is an advantage when searching for a good college fit. “We are a cohort of professionals who can help with the recruitment funnel. We don’t receive any type of commission from institutions but we still work hard to understand what type of students would be the best fit,” said Dooley.

Kolber echoed that fit is key, “You’re hiring somebody who’s going to help your student find school that’s an academic fit. It’s not to game the system.”

IECs who are members of ethical professional organizations must adhere to a stringent code of ethics that keep the student’s best interest—a good college fit—at the core. “Consultants who are not attentive to ethical issues don’t last very long,” said Sklarow.

---

**Andy Brown** is a freelance writer in Alexandria, VA and owner of Methodical Writing ([www.methodicalwriting.com](http://www.methodicalwriting.com)).